

How are whole texts structured?

Whole text organisation

To compose an effective text, writers need to be able to organise the whole text in a systematic and logical manner to ensure that the message is clear and complete. As well as organising ideas at sentence level, writers need to organise the text as a whole and this involves planning what they are going to say and then organising their ideas into logical, well-developed paragraphs.

The overall construction of the text must conform to the structural conventions of the text type. For example, if the text type is an exposition (persuasion), its basic structure needs to be:

- statement of position and preview of argument
- stages in the argument
- summing up of position.

A text of this type would probably consist of at least four paragraphs.

Paragraphs

A paragraph is an organised part of a whole piece of writing. It begins with a topic sentence that introduces what is to be discussed in the rest of the paragraph. A paragraph is usually more than one sentence long, yet it can be short and effective as in this introduction to a persuasive text:

The dumping of unwanted cats in the bushland near Sydney is a hazard for native fauna and flora. People need to be aware of the consequences of dumping cats and take a more responsible attitude. The future of wildlife is at stake.

The text now needs to develop the arguments to support this position. Each paragraph must focus on one aspect of the argument. If it fails to do this, and introduces ideas that are inconsistent with what is introduced in the topic sentence, the paragraph can be seen as unsuccessful. For example:

*Dumped cats turn into feral cats and kill rats and mice as well as small native animals. These animals have not learned how to keep themselves safe from these new predators so they easily get killed. **People should remember that and give unwanted pets to the pet shop to sell. The pet shop in Cronulla pays good money for kittens. That way you could make some money out of unwanted cats.***

Here the writing loses focus and introduces ideas that are not relevant to the topic sentence.

A successful paragraph introduces its topic and proceeds to explore it logically and with some development. For example:

***Feral cats do damage to native plants too.** When they kill native fauna, the balance of nature is affected. Birds and possums help to spread seeds and so new plants grow. Birds also help to pollinate some plants. When feral cats kill all the wildlife, seeds aren't spread around and plants don't get pollinated so native plants die out.*

Here the topic sentence *Feral cats do damage to native plants too* is developed logically with examples of the damage and the consequences.

In literary texts paragraphs indicate the introduction of new circumstances or characters into the writing. Writers divide their writing into sections which deal with one action or scene. Paragraphs show the introduction of:

- a change of ideas or character focus
- a shift in the action
- a movement in time or setting
- a change of speakers in conversation.

Paragraph indicators

Paragraphs can be indicated by indentation or line breaks. In first draft writing, such as ELLA and BST Writing, students may indicate paragraphs by square brackets.

Some writers indicate paragraphs in a random fashion, so care needs to be taken to ensure that ideas within the paragraphs are organised logically and appropriately.

Activity ten: paragraphs

Read the narrative passage below. Discuss where the scenes or actions change.

Use square brackets to indicate where new paragraphs could begin.

The storm blew up quickly and rain drummed down onto the tin roof of our shack. The grey clouds swirled low in the sky and gusty winds drove the sea angrily against the rock ledge beneath us. By nightfall, the storm had worsened. The gale-force winds threatened to tear our humble hut from its foundations. The doors and windows shuddered and the air was filled with the sound of the constant pounding of the waves. Patrick tried in vain to start a fire in the grate but the air, forcing down the chimney, kept blowing out his kindling. He knew if he gave up, it was going to be a long, cold night for everyone. Suddenly, the whole room was hit with a shaft of bright light and we all steeled ourselves for the thunderous crack we knew would follow.

Solution to Activity ten: paragraphs

The storm blew up quickly ...

[*By nightfall, the storm had worsened ...* **movement in time**

[*Patrick tried in vain ...* **change in character focus**

[*Suddenly, the whole room was hit ...* **shift in the action**

Steps for paragraph writing

Step1 — write an outline

When writing a paragraph, first write an outline of the paragraph and include:

- the topic
- supporting information.

Example

Topic — smoking & health hazards

Outline

Lung cancer — proven link

Other lung diseases — emphysema, bronchitis

Heart disease — risk factor

Passive smoking — effect on others

Step 2 — write the topic sentence

Write a topic sentence.

Example

There are several serious health hazards directly linked to smoking.

Step 3 — write supporting sentences

Next write a supporting sentence for each point. Use facts or examples to support your points.

Example

The link between smoking and cancer is well known. As well smoking is linked to other lung diseases like emphysema and bronchitis. Smokers also have a greater risk of heart disease later in life. This is evidenced in recent court cases in the USA where smokers have been awarded damages from tobacco companies.

Further, there is substantial research that even passive smoking can have long term effects on health.

Step 4 — concluding sentence

Then write a concluding sentence to sum up.

Example

Clearly smoking is a dangerous habit and should be avoided.

The Paragraph test

When you are proofreading for relevance, ask yourself if each paragraph passes the 'paragraph test'; that is, ask what this paragraph contributes to the whole text. Can you justify its existence? Is it adding to the information or giving a contrasting point? Is it establishing the first step in the development of the topic or is it explaining a cause for an occurrence?

Then test if you have made this explicit in the first sentence of the paragraph so that the reader is in no doubt about its relevance. Writing a topic sentence that explicitly links this paragraph to the argument or information of the task is a sure way to ensure its relevance. If you cannot tie the paragraph into the task in this way throw it out!

Morley-Warner, T. 2007, *Academic Writing is.....*Centre for Research and Education in the Arts

ELSSA Centre, UTS, 2009

Paragraph

<p>Another common point of view is that Australia is a classless society. Many Australians believe that anyone who works hard can move into a higher social class, and that people who do not move upwards have either chosen to remain where they are, or do not have the ability or drive to make a change. However, class does play a major part in students' educational outcomes (Sharp, 1994). The education system reproduces the values of the dominant class and it "evaluates all pupils according to their mastery of the dominant culture" (Bilton et al., 1996, p. 357). Students from the dominant class are more likely to succeed at school because they share the school's values. They expect the system to prepare them for tertiary education and prestigious occupations. On the other hand, working class students often see little value in a system which was not designed to bring them academic or occupational success (Bilton et al., 1996), and so many of them leave school as soon as possible (Connell et al., 1982). Rather than being classless, therefore, Australia is a society where class determines the life chances of many people.</p>	<p><i>Topic sentence announcing what the paragraph will discuss and linking back to a previously made point (Another common point of view)</i></p> <p><i>Second sentence elaborates the point.</i></p> <p><i>Linking word 'However' signaling different view being put forward. Claim supported by literature.</i></p> <p><i>Example of effective way to use a direct quotation, as part of a sentence.</i></p> <p><i>Linking word indicating change in view again. View supported by literature.</i></p> <p><i>Good example of referencing, two points from different authors made in one sentence to strengthen the point.</i></p> <p><i>Final comment to assert that the paragraph has made the point that although a common view is that Australia is a classless society it is not. Thus it is clear to see an overall point has been made.</i></p>
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PARAGRAPHS

A paragraph is a group of related sentences set off by a line space. For you, and your readers, paragraphs provide breathers from long stretches of text and indicate key changes in your development of ideas. In the body of your essay, you may use paragraphs for any of these purposes:

- * To introduce one of the main points supporting your essay's central idea (its thesis) and to develop the point with examples, facts, or other supporting evidence.
- * To shift approach - for instance, from pros to cons, from problem to solution, from questions to answers.
- * To mark movement in a sequence, such as from one reason or step to another.
- * Within a group of paragraphs centring on one main point, to introduce and develop a key example or other important evidence.

A paragraph must be unified
coherent
adequately developed

UNITY

A paragraph must be unified - ie. adhere to one general idea that is either stated in the topic sentence or otherwise apparent. Readers generally expect a paragraph to explore one idea. They will be alert for that idea and will patiently follow its development. In other words, they will seek and appreciate paragraph unity, clear identification and clear elaboration of one idea and of that idea only.

Study the following paragraph. It lacks unity. Can you work out why it is not unified?

There are two main reasons why I have decided to attend Bingson University next year. Applying to a college is a terribly complicated business. Some of my friends chose colleges for very bad reasons. John has never been to college. I've met his grandfather, and he still has an incredibly sharp mind for a man of his age. Susan chose a university because the food in the region was said to be quite good. Susan is not really too clever, I suppose, so I shouldn't criticise her. Actually, I think it was her father who made the choice for her.

If we wanted to keep the same topic sentence and rewrite the paragraph in a more unified way, we might end up with something like this:

There are two main reasons why I have decided to attend Bington University next year. First of all, there is the question of money: Bington's tuition is reasonable, and I don't even have to pay it all at once. This is very important, since my parents are not rich. With Bington's deferred payment plan, my parents will be able to pay my tuition without too much difficulty. The second reason is the fine education which I feel I will receive there in agriculture, my chosen field. It is a well-known fact that Bington hires only the finest professors in its Agriculture Department. Moreover, the university requires all agricultural students to gain practical experience by working on local farms while they are still going to school.

Notice that in the rewritten paragraph, the writer gives both reasons and comments on both of them. Nothing is extra. Nothing is irrelevant to the topic announced in the topic sentence: The paragraph is unified. This means readers will have no trouble quickly understanding what the writer is trying to say.